The Tokugawa Shogunate was a feudal military dictatorship in Japan that lasted for almost three hundred years, from 1603 to 1868. The period in Japanese history in which the Tokugawa Shogunate held power is called the Edo period, after the capital of Japan during the Shogunate. The Tokugawa Shogunate marks the period in Japanese history when the caste system was most rigid, leading eventually to social unrest, culminating in an overthrow of the Shogunate and the installation of Emperor [Meiji](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-was-the-meiji-period.htm).

The Tokugawa family rose to power in 1603, after a period of warring states and political intrigue destabilized Japan. The family ruled from Edo castle and based its source of power on a very rigid social hierarchy with minimal mobility between classes. The warrior samurai held the most power, followed by farmers, artisans, and traders. Land was controlled by daimyo, or feudal lords, who collected taxes and military service from their peasant vassals. This ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate, because most taxes were fixed and did not take inflation into account, leading to poverty and bitter battles among the ruling classes.

The Tokugawa Shogunate held ultimate power over land and could dispense, annex, or transform lands held by the daimyo at will. The daimyo families were expected to split themselves between managing their han, or land holdings, and spending time in Edo with the Shogunate. Daimyo were expected to have absolute loyalty to the Tokugawa Shogunate and could be severely punished if they were suspected of plotting against the military government.

The Emperor was considered the official leader of Japan, and the Tokugawa Shogunate merely his administrative arm. In practice, however, the Shogunate controlled Japanese social, political, economic, and environmental policies with an iron fist. During the Meiji Restoration, the Emperor's powers were returned as part of the terms of the new government.

The Tokugawa Shogunate also controlled all foreign trade, invoking heavy penalties on those who attempted to trade outside the Shogunate. Until 1635, when seclusion laws were introduced, Japan traded widely across the Pacific with numerous ships. After 1635, leaving Japan was severely punished, and only inbound Dutch and Chinese ships were permitted. The Dutch used this trade monopoly to their advantage in Europe. The Tokugawa Shogunate had a very rigid system of class and political power, marked by strict rules of social and political conduct, and a complex hierarchy of officials. The Japanese studied Western technology through books and materials brought on board Dutch ships, and Japanese refinements of many Western inventions appeared during the Tokugawa Shogunate, including clocks and astronomical devices.

Culturally and artistically, the rule of the Shogunate marks a period of advancement in Japan, when leisure arts began to be valued. The Tokugawa Shogunate saw an explosion of woodblock prints such as those created by Hokusai, a flowering of [geisha](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-geisha.htm) culture, and many advancements in the arts and letters. The Shogunate prized many Confucian values and integrated them into Japanese culture to create graceful and contemplative works of art, literature, and theatre.

The Tokugawa Shogunate lost power when Japan was forced to open to the West, as the foreign intrusion proved too much for the delicate balance of Edo society. Attempts to reconcile the commercial and capitalized society that the West brought with the military society of the Tokugawa Shogunate were ultimately unsuccessful, and the Shogunate lost power in favor of more democratic and flexible methods of government.